
Wrestling Observer Newsletter

PO Box 1228, Campbell, CA 95009-1228 ISSN10839593

April 25, 2018

BRUNO VS. HARLEY: OVERCOMING WRESTLING POLITICS TO CREATE HISTORY

Editor's Note: Larry Matysik, host of Wrestling At The Chase, the right-hand man of legendary St. Louis promoter Sam Muchnick, and frequent Wrestling Observer Radio guest, submitted this story to us about the machinations behind the 1973 NWA title match between Harley Race and Bruno Sammartino.

As smart, stiff, and stubborn as the competition was during the struggle for the NWA throne between titleholder Harley Race and challenger Bruno Sammartino on June 15, 1973, the politics that made the showdown possible were just as stressful. Not a shoot (they didn't happen anymore) and thanks to the pressure packed disagreements, Race and Sammartino believed each had something to prove when the bell clanged.

The calculating maneuvers deeply involved the Funk family, particularly Dory Sr. and Dory Jr., along with NWA president Sam Muchnick, Tampa promoter Eddie Graham, Jack Brisco, WWWF boss, New York promoter and Sammartino booker Vince McMahon Sr., and several discontented NWA promoters who agreed with the views of Dory Sr.

There were two lines of politics at play: one was in the National Wrestling Alliance involving the Funks, Brisco, and Graham plus a couple other big players. The other was not between Sam and Vince Sr. – they seemed content with their relation at the time – but rather sending Muchnick and McMahon against a crew of particular promoters apparently on the opposite side of Muchnick.

And where were Dory Sr. and Sam? For years, those two had been allies. Now, nobody was sure anymore and the game changed nearly every day. It's easy to see why consternation inside the wrestling business was boiling. No wonder Sammartino and Race felt the pressure to perform at the highest level in their historic contest. At their prime, they were two proud and talented competitors. The tension was not lessened one iota even though the quarrel had apparently been solved.

Like all wrestling disputes, however, finally settling the political arguments was never easy to do, especially this one. It wasn't a shot, but darned if it didn't mean something to everyone involved.

The entire matter began when Dory Jr. captured the World Championship as recognized by the National Wrestling Alliance on Feb. 11, 1969, in Tampa. Major decisions like this were made by the NWA Board of Directors, a tidy group of seven. Within, there was some scuffling about the choice of Funk to replace Gene Kiniski. For one, Cowboy Bill Watts wanted the role. Adding to the debate was the fact that both Dory Jr. and Watts had been busy in St. Louis working for Sam Muchnick, the NWA president and the most influential member of the board. Another clever manipulator on the board was Dory Jr.'s rugged father, Dory Sr., who had become a close friend of none other than Sam.

In the end, Watts got only one vote from Tulsa promoter Leroy McGuirk, Watts' business partner. With the pushes of Sr. and Muchnick, Jr. received the remaining tallies and was picked as the youngest champion aside from Lou Thesz in 1937. Dory Jr. turned out to be a highly successful kingpin, working wherever Muchnick booked him, big markets or small. He learned the tricks of a champion, to make a challenger look capable of winning. A fine football player in college with a deep knowledge of wrestling thanks to his dad, he could take care of himself and even be sort of a heel when it was worth it.

Most of all, he consistently drew big crowds, earning good money for promoters and wrestlers alike. I always felt that part of his appeal was that Dory was so young that many fans attended figuring a more experienced, most nasty foe would make an exciting title change likely. That didn't happen, though, and admiration for Funk grew. Dory dressed the part and conducted himself like a professional champion and his rivalry with Jack Brisco, another young superstar, became known worldwide. Every fan knew about Dory's spinning toehold.

But the reigns of all champions eventually come to an end. After a little more than four years, Dory had turned back most of the leading contenders in the NWA. Likewise, some of the attendance figures had slipped somewhat. They were not bad, but were not as outstanding as earlier. When the Board of Directors decided those reasons meant it was time for a new champion, Sr. balked. Some promoters needed to develop new challengers, he said. Muchnick's booking of Jr. was unimaginative and repetitive, Sr. claimed, especially the finishes Sam would allow.

Nonetheless, Jack Brisco was selected to take Jr.'s position as World Champion in Houston on March 2, 1973. Eddie Graham was a strong advocate of Brisco getting the crown, which led to the end of Graham's friendship with Dory Sr. When Jr. was bidding for the title, Graham pushed for him. Muchnick respectfully agreed it was time for a change, voting for Brisco and that swayed some others.

Here's where it gets thorny.

Some promoters then and historians now feel that Sr., and perhaps Jr. as well, rejected the plan of Jr. losing to another babyface like Brisco. That rather old school theory said that a babyface should lose to a heel and a heel should lose to a babyface. There are those followers of Brisco who thought that the Funks didn't want Jr. to be beaten by a past NCAA wrestling champion like Brisco because it would detract from Jr.'s noted scientific skills. (Jack himself may have felt that way.)

And a small, but determined, part of the disagreement was that maybe time had passed Muchnick by and it was best for him to go and Funk to stay with a new president. There definitely were angry arguments within the NWA depending on the different viewpoints.

How do I know all this? Well, I was working as a publicity man in Sam's office and had earned his respect. Sometimes, I was invited into his room to listen to his telephone discussion about the hullabaloo. Sometimes, he just wanted to talk about the situation, and he talked with me. On some occasions, Wild Bill Longson, Sam's minority partner in the St. Louis Wrestling Club, told me how frustrated Muchnick was and why. Remember, Muchnick and Longson both had lengthy and knowledgeable histories in the politics of wrestling. Both of them, and Sam in particular, had heard, seen, and probably done it all.

In this case, what brought everything to a head was the truck wreck Jr. had on Poppa Funk's ranch on February 28. The timing was such, only two days before the match with Brisco was scheduled, that many skeptical wrestling insiders questioned if there really had been an accident and Jr. really had been injured. Paul Boesch, the Houston promoter, was especially unhappy and disbelieving since he had to refund tickets for what he had plugged as a major show.

Muchnick set a record for being neutral as he tried to balance all the emotional reactions. He requested and received written description of what had happened in the accident and how long the injuries would sideline Jr. Sam distributed that news to all the NWA membership, dubious or not as he worried about keeping the NWA together.

He also worried about St. Louis, his own town. With Dory and the champion out of the picture, the bouts Sam and booker Pat O'Connor

had planned were down the drain. As usual, meticulous planning had it set up for Brisco vs. Dory's brother Terry, Brisco vs. Gene Kiniski or Harley Race, and Brisco in a rematch vs. Dory Junior. The last thing Muchnick needed was an NWA collapse and the departure of some key performers.

This, however, was a big-time political game.

In this case, it gave Muchnick a reason to call Vince McMahon, Sr. At that time, Vince Sr. was running the World Wide Wrestling Federation, which in essence was the public name of his promotion for Northeast towns he owned like New York, Boston, Baltimore, and Philadelphia. Vince was also an NWA member.

In a dispute about the title in 1963, McMahon had departed the NWA and, with a win over Buddy Rogers on May 17, 1963, named Bruno Sammartino the champion of the "new" WWWF. McMahon returned to the NWA when his organization was challenged by a lucrative independent promotion. That was no big deal, because McMahon and Muchnick had remained good friends, despite any business differences.

Meanwhile, Sammartino had developed an amazing reputation over eight years as Vince's champion. He also had good rapport with Muchnick, who found Bruno a gentleman and a businessman. The politics clicking in Sam's head as the Funk-NWA controversy evolved led to him booking Sammartino for St. Louis. McMahon told Sam that Bruno would regain the WWWF honor in later in 1973.

Sam put two-and-two together. When Jr. sent word he could get back in action, the Funks had agreed for Jr. to drop the NWA prize to Race in Kansas City on May 24. This would be before bad guy Race had agreed to lose that belt to Brisco in Houston on July 20. KC was an NWA stronghold, plus it owned minority interest in St. Louis. Surely, it could be trusted to keep its word and make Funk lose to Race.

But if any hint of a double-cross got in the wind, Muchnick wanted it known that thanks to his relationships with Vince and Bruno, Sam might pull St. Louis out of the NWA and join the WWWF. Now that was hardball politics.

To play it safe, Sam booked Race against Sammartino in St. Louis on June 15 which allowed him to go either way with the finish. While Muchnick expected smart local fans to know all about the mighty Sammartino, he made sure by giving him a series of triumphs over Ivan Koloff, The Invader (unmasked as Dick Murdoch), Rip Hawk, Dan Miller, and George Steele. It would still be a remarkable match either way.

When Race and Sammartino squared off that night, they both knew what the deal was. The mat world would remain basically the same. By autumn, Brisco would dethrone Race and Sammartino would upend Stan Stasiak for their respective championships. Sadly, Sr. passed away on June 3rd. Muchnick clearly was in charge of the NWA, and actually thought very highly of Dory Jr.

Thus, the only question remaining was how Sammartino and Race would conduct their one-hour draw. Neither side wanted to devise a finish that would restart the problems there had been. Now, all the politics and psychology were dropped in the competitors' laps: two out of three falls, one hour time limit. Pat O'Connor, who had told me this tale before he departed for New Zealand in 1982, had said, "Do the right thing. You're both smart enough."

It was just the correct basic advice he'd passed on to Sammartino and Race in 1973 and said it would be true for me even a decade later if I was working with the correct combatants. *Listen to the crowd. They'll lead you, tell you what to do.* For what ever difficulties O'Connor sometimes had, he was right on the money with that advice.

To the match itself for those who have never seen it, here was my own notes:

"Slow start, felt out each other. Big crowd settling in. A couple tests of strength with wristlocks, and handlock tests, after pretty even duels won by Bruno. Race got in control with chin locks, pulling tights, and mainly choking. Just when Harley opened up with punches and headbutts, Bruno fought back with forearm smashes and reversed a whip into the corner. Race tried his suplex, but Sammartino blocked it getting a two-count after his own body slam. More tests of strength with Race getting nailed by body slams. Reverse neck breaker by Race. Two flying tackles by Race, but Bruno stood his ground and flattened Harley. But then Race got Bruno in a front rolling cradle. Bruno kicked out at two. Race punched after delivering a headbutt to jaw. Bruno fought back, but missed a shot. Race went behind and hit one, then two atomic knee drops, lifted and then twice jammed Bruno's tailbone into his knee. Race got the pin for the first fall in 17:12. Now the fans were into it."

The battle sped up quite a bit, plus another element was added in the second fall. It was extremely hot in the building, nudging just over 100 degrees. (Even though Kiel Auditorium was air conditioned, the equipment was not working well.) Another problem was that smoking was still allowed, so the interior was not only boiling hot, but permeated with smoke. Clearly, Sammartino and Race were more comfortable working with each other, each taking impressive bumps from slams and arm whips, but the pair was visibly soaked in sweat.

As the fall neared an end, Race and Sammartino both looked as though they were standing in a hot shower, sweat pouring down their faces. Race seemed to have the edge, especially dropping diving headbutts from mat level into Sammartino's muscular chest and neck. Then, Race banged his knee into Sammartino's forehead. Sensing a final opening, Race went up on the top rope to unleash his most potent diving headbutt. But, that backfired when Sammartino plucked Race off the top, hoisted him high into the air and scored with a spine rattling body slam, followed by two more awesome body slams.

Sammartino bounced Race off the ropes and trapped Race in his famous bearhug. Squeeze, squeeze, squeeze, and finally Race realized escape was impossible thanks to Sammartino's raw power. Rather than risk injury, Race submitted the second fall in 11:53.

When the bell sounded for the final fall, more than 20 minutes remained in the 60 minute time limit. Thus, few spectators in the capacity house expected a draw with that much time left and the majority was yelling for Sammartino, but still, plenty were for Race and his NWA connection. Yet, it seemed both Sammartino and Race cranked up their offenses to demonstrate why they were ranked as the best. The heat and smoke ramped up, too, leading to some of the sharpest wrestling gossip in years.

Both combatants were sweating constantly. Later, after the contest was finished, Race noted he didn't train hard and smoked regularly. To the contrary, he pointed out, Sammartino did not smoke, was a heavy weightlifter, and took care of his cardio with regular running. Nonetheless, said Race, Sammartino was pouring sweat and puffing when the two locked up. Race also claimed that Sammartino was so dehydrated that he licked the sweat off Race's neck, chest, and arms to get some water.

These two had a lot to prove to each other and to fans as athletes and performers. They knew what they were doing, but pride was on the line. Naturally, Sammartino responded by saying that it was Race who was so dehydrated that he greedily tried to get moisture by licking the sweat off Sammartino's body. Nobody will ever know the truth, and it might be partially in the favor of both. This much, however, is fact: neither man held back one bit despite terrible conditions and each proved himself truly unique in the wrestling world.

That final fall was loaded with everything from some wrestling holds and moves, rough-and-tumble back and forth, Race scoring with his suplex and Sammartino unable to keep Race trapped in again in the bearhug. Race failed to pin Sammartino after a diving headbutt from the top turnbuckle. Sammartino tried the hanging backbreaker, but Race kicked off the rope to land a back bodydrop. Sammartino's strength had him up before the two count. Those twenty-plus minutes passed like lightning.

I was the ring announcer and called, "One minute left". Race hooked Sammartino's head to try another suplex, but Sammartino broke free. Race hit the ropes, charging forward with a flying tackle, but Sammartino ensnared him with another bearhug. Only seconds remained before the one hour time limit expired and Race was not conceding. Even without the orders of a booker, Race and Sammartino had managed to subdue their substantial egos and engineer an exciting one hour draw. The two superstars finished as the politics wanted them to: completely even, a draw.

Race had the championship for just 57 days in between Funk and Brisco. Nonetheless, he earned plenty of favors for how he conducted himself and even for what he did as a former ruler after Brisco assumed the throne. Race and Bob Geigel controlled the KC vote, and didn't stir up any trouble. Race dropped the crown to Brisco on July 20, 1973, in Houston.

Their vote was for Terry Funk to be champion, which Jr. wanted, when it was time for Brisco to move on Dec. 10, 1975. When Muchnick retired, feeling the NWA was in shaky condition, Geigel was satisfied to be the front man as NWA president. That put Jim Barnett as the powerhouse booking the champion and handling the funds. Race had favors returned when he knocked off Terry Funk on Feb. 6, 1977 in Toronto.

As for Sammartino, he dethroned Stan Stasiak on Dec. 10, 1973. The trails leading from both sides all lead to Hulk Hogan and eventually, the WWF/E. It can all be traced back to what happened when politics created the Sammartino-Race struggle, long after Buddy Rogers ran into Bruno Sammartino.

Truly, Bruno vs. Harley was a duel to remember for a number of reasons.